

Editorial 3 - *The Reading Loft* – Television vs. Books, a Difficult Parental Decision.

Reading Your Mind

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During my graduate studies in psychology I worked in a program serving handicapped children. I learned many ways in which a child's inappropriate responses could be reduced in intensity, frequency, or duration. Of all the interventions, I found reinforcing appropriate behavior to be helpful in combatting the one I wanted to reduce the most interesting. Using this procedure with a six-year-old retarded, self-abusing boy, I was able to reduce self-hitting by rewarding the holding of a ball with both hands. The principle behind the success is obvious.

This same procedure, on a massive scale, has been institutionalized in many of the 97% of American homes owning a television. The outcome, however, is not as positive as with my handicapped child. Thousands of studies on television indicate that as the amount of television viewing increases, the amount of reading, creative play, and family interaction decreases. As a society we are just beginning to feel the impact of a generation deficit in these skills.

Where reading and television compete, reading is the loser. Television's low performance demands result in the average family watching programming up to seven hours a day. No wonder reading is taking a back seat. Television is the American way of life.

Society has changed sharply these past 50 years, and television has played a major role. As a key player, the television industry must

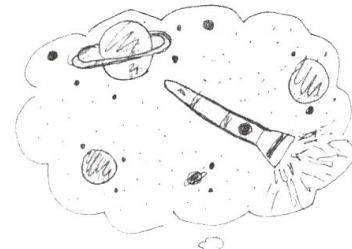
take some responsibility, but they are hesitant. Talking during class, sending notes, not turning in assignments are representative of student behaviors concerning educators in 1940. Today's issues are drugs, rape, arson, weapons in the classroom, etc. Recent research has clearly shown a cultural increase in violent crimes 15 years after the introduction of American style television programming. These dramatic shifts also tend to diminish the importance of another negative trend, the decline of "literate" readers. This too may be partially blamed on television since so much time is diverted away from reading to sitting in front of the box. The criticism must be weighed against the good and was foreseen almost 50 years ago by E.B. White.

"Television - it will become the test of the modern world - capable of 'radiance' but likely to produce 'an unbearable disturbance of the general peace.'"

Some of this

"unbearable disturbance" is what is taking children away from creative play, enriched imaginations, and good stories. Today's children have so many images supplied to them, that many youngsters are losing the ability to form picture images in their minds. This may explain why so many children are unable to "see" solutions to their own problems. They have difficulty imagining positive outcomes.

Please reflect on the fact that many children will spend more time in front of the television than anything else they do besides sleep. Television may well be the



primary socializing agent in a child's life and will provide distorted images of the world they live in. By high school graduation the average student will have viewed 20,000 murders and watched over 350,000 commercials. They may have learned apathy for other's pain, adjusted in a negative way to hypocrisy as practiced by the adult world, and developed unrealistic fears and anxieties.

Aside from the violence issue, basic questions about the media should be asked. Does television make life more meaningful and people more active? Does it bring us

closer to other people and give us a more personal understanding of ourselves? Does it encourage adventure and encourage us to take positive risks? Does it give us the tools to deal with the pains inflicted by society, other humans, and by aging? Does it stimulate our imaginations and give us hope?

If not the media, then why books? This question was asked by Marie Winn in her book, *The Plug-in Drug: Television, Children, and the Family*. She points out that T.V. and books require two different modes of thinking. Television carries the viewer along in a way which disallows the use of the most highly developed mental abilities or the fulfillment of individual emotional needs. Books transfer the symbols on

the page into a particular form dictated by the child's individual human nature, his wishes, fears, and inner needs. One form is

passive, while the other is active. "He is entertained while watching television, but his passive participation leaves him unchanged in a human sense. For while television viewing provides diversion, reading allows and supports growth."

In his book, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Neil Postman suggests that active childrearing goes against the grain of current American values. The pervasiveness of media in our society requires active resistance if parents are to resist the disjointed spirit of the age. He reminds us that for parents to merely stay together requires that they must resist the values of a throwaway culture, and that to teach a child values through extended family experiences, the disciplines of delayed gratification, modesty, and self-restraint in manners, language and style is to place oneself in opposition to social trends. To ensure that one's children work hard at becoming literate is extraordinarily time consuming. It demands that parents spend a great deal of time with their children and that they control access to the media. They have two choices in this. One is to restrict access to the media itself and the other is to spend the time necessary to process the programs the child views in terms of values, attitudes, behaviors and their consequences. Parents who undertake such a noble task will rear children who will be able to use their full abilities, not only for themselves, but for society as a whole.

